

Suggestions for Analyzing Poetry



Reading a poem more than once will help determine the meaning. Read straight through the first time to get a general sense of the poem. Then, re-read the poem and try to understand the poem's meaning and organization. Ask the following questions. Not all will apply to every poem, but the answers will help analyze the poet's meaning:

1. What does the title contribute to the reader's understanding?
2. Who is the speaker (in poetry, called the persona)? What kind of person is he/she?
3. To whom is the speaker speaking? What kind of person is he/she?
4. What is the situation/occasion?
5. What is the setting in time (time of day, season, century, etc.)?
6. What is the setting in place (indoors, out; city or country, etc.)?
7. What is the purpose of the poem?
8. State the main idea or theme of the poem in a sentence.
9. Discuss the tone of the poem. How is it achieved?
10. Discuss the diction of the poem. Point out words that are particularly well chosen and explain why.
11. Discuss the imagery of the poem. What kinds of imagery (appeal to senses) are used?
12. Point out examples of metaphor, simile, and/or personification and explain their appropriateness and effect on the reader.
13. Point out and explain any symbols.
14. Point out and explain examples of paradox, overstatement, understatement, and irony. What do they add to the poem?
15. Point out any allusions (references). What is their function?
16. Point out any significant sound repetition, rhyme, or rhythm that adds an emotional response to the reader.

EXPLICATION:

You might think of an explication as a personal explanation or "reading" of the poem. Because it does not require exhaustive detail, be *selective* and consider *only those details that are significant in themselves and vital to the development of the theme*. Your explication should demonstrate your ability to (1) identify the main idea or theme of the poem (2) understand the issues and the meaning the poet reveals, (3) explain some of the poetic devices used, and (4) discuss especially important or unique aspects of the poem.

The paper itself should have an introduction that contains a well thought out thesis, several body paragraphs that develop the theme, and a discussion of the poetic devices used by the poet and how they add to the reader's response to the poem. The first sentence should name the poet and the work, identify the persona and the audience, and contain a brief description of the poem. The last sentence of the intro should be the thesis that will focus on the poem's theme. The body of the paper should have several paragraphs that elaborate on that thesis. The conclusion should restate the thesis and give an overall evaluation of the poet's effectiveness in conveying the stated theme.